Detroit Masonic Temple: From Grandeur to Ghetto

by Jeff Stokes on 18/11/10 at 4:06 pm

This article was originally published in Issue 3 of Masonic Magazine.

By Stephen Dafoe

The Poet's Tears & The Masons' Shame

Robbie Burns is standing in Detroit's Cass Park with his arms folded. The poet's stance suggests that he might be contemplating his next literary work, except for the tears in his eyes.

Looking northward toward the intersection of Temple Avenue and Second Boulevard, where the cornerstone to the famed Detroit Masonic Temple was laid in 1922, he can see a garbage bag lying on the street beneath the very spot where George Washington's working tools were once used to spread the cement for the stone.

Burns wonders why nobody bothers to pick it up.

He wonders what happened to the pride and optimism that made the neighborhood so vibrant during the 1920s and he wonders why his Masonic Brethren no longer seem to share that fraternal pride. He knows, all too well, that if something drastic does not happen soon, his beloved Masonic Temple will be boarded up just like the Hotel Fort Wayne, the Temple Towers and many of the other buildings in the neighborhood. And he is afraid; afraid to be left alone in the ghetto that the neighborhood has now become.

Of course, Brother Burns is just a bronze statue. The poet's likeness was erected in 1921 by the Detroit Burns Club in Cass Park, which takes its name from another famous Mason, Lewis Cass, who was not only Michigan's first territorial governor, but also the first Grand Master of Masons in Michigan.

While bronze statues are not capable of sentient thought, Burns' statue, if it could think, would not be alone in its assessment of the probable fate that awaits the world's largest Masonic Temple.

Russell Spice is the secretary of the Masonic Temple Association of Detroit, a position he has held for the past eleven years. In fact, Spice has been on the board for the last 27 years and is the association's longest serving member. As such, he is knowledgeable, candid and certainly pulls no punches when it comes to talking about his Temple.

"We are broke," Spice said. "We have a negative balance sheet; the bills cannot be paid and there is a grave situation of [boarding] up the building and closing it."

The probable loss of the Detroit Masonic Temple is quite possibly a microcosm of the state of North American Freemasonry today. While the loss of any Masonic building shows that there are not enough financial resources in that jurisdiction to support a building, there is a much bigger picture to be seen. The closure of any Masonic Temple shows that there is not enough support in principle, membership or

cash to continue on with the traditions started by the Masons of a bygone era, who, with hammer, saw and clear vision, set out to create physical landmarks on the North American landscape inside of which they could practice the philosophical landmarks of their craft.

Each time a Masonic building is allowed to rot from lack of care or pride, it is akin to placing an aged loved one in a nursing home, there to rot alone, unloved and forgotten. When we allow this disrespect of our collective Masonic heritage to occur in favor of supporting yet another charity, the principles of Freemasonry take yet another devastating blow.

Like all the great physical landmarks of Freemasonry, the Detroit Masonic Temple and its plight is a cause for which all Masons ought to rally around. In order to understand why this building is so important to the craft, we need to examine how the Temple came to be, what it once was and then reflect upon what we have allowed it to become through our own neglect.

Older Detroit Masonic Temple
Older Detroit Masonic Temple

Designs Upon a Trestleboard

Towards the end of the 19th century, the various Masonic bodies, then meeting in Detroit, were scattered. According to Spice, who is well versed in the history of Detroit Masonry, “the Masonic fraternity in Detroit decided they wanted to build a building that they would own because all the different branches were renting in different parts of the city and we decided to come together as one and build our own.”

Those plans commenced on August 11, 1892, when three lots were purchased at First Street and Lafayette Boulevard at a cost of $50,200, which would be over $1.3 million in today’s money. Soon after, this newly acquired property was merged with that owned by the Michigan Sovereign Consistory and the present Masonic Temple Association of Detroit, which Spice is currently secretary of, was born.

Despite the fact that the United States was in the midst of an economic depression, the Masons of that era were determined to push forward to make their dream of a new Masonic Temple a reality. The cost of that dream was $344,198 or $80 per member. To put those costs into a modern perspective; the new Temple, which opened in 1895, was erected at a cost of over $7 million or $1,642 per member in 2006 dollars.

The Lafayette building was a seven-story tall red brick building; 140 feet in height with a basement that plunged 12 feet below the grade and consisted of a total volume of 1,743,600 cubic feet of space. The auditorium seated 750 people; 450 on the main floor and an additional 300 in the balcony area (1).

As impressive as the new Temple was, it became obsolete early into its second decade of existence. A publication put out in 1926, telling the story of the present Detroit Masonic Temple, provides us with an insight as to why.

Notwithstanding the careful planning and wise devising of the committee, the Order outgrew the Lafayette Boulevard Temple in twelve years and in 1908 it was crowded to capacity. The growth of the Order had been so rapid that it was found necessary to place restrictions on the use of the dining room service, the assembly halls and other parts of the Temple. With the idea in mind of enlarging the

Temple then in use, the Temple Association finally purchased 50 additional feet of land on Lafayette Boulevard from the Newland Estate and 16 feet from the Benevolent Order of Elks. (2)

George D. Mason & Co., who would go on to design the present Temple, was employed to draw the plans for the enlargement of the Lafayette Temple. Postcards from the early 20th century clearly show the difference between the 1895 Temple and the proposed expansion. It was decided however, that the additional land would not be sufficient to carry out the plans and in 1913, the Temple Association decided to look for land elsewhere in Detroit.

After much consideration, they settled on a parcel of land which consisted of 350 feet on Bagg Street (now Temple Avenue) and extending eastward to the Northeast corner of Second Boulevard, where the cornerstone of the new Temple was laid in 1922.

Originally the Temple was to be in the shape of a Master's gavel, with the ritual rooms comprising a tower to the Northeast and the auditorium / dining facilities forming the handle of the gavel to the west. These plans were scrapped when the Moslem Shrine Temple purchased 50 feet of land on Bagg Street and decided to come on board with the new project.

With Mason & Co. turning in modified designs, which now included plans for a 10-story Shrine headquarters, the Temple Association went about securing subscriptions to finance the new Temple. As with most Masonic buildings of that era, the Detroit Temple was built entirely free of debt. Those initial subscriptions from Masons amounted to $2.5 million or just under $27 million in today's currency and the final building costs were $7 million or $74 million by today's comparison. Clearly post-World War I Masons were prepared to express their fraternal optimism in terms of dollars and were not the least bit reluctant to put their pocketbooks where their dreams lay.

Ahead With Optimism

If Lewis Cass could have seen the gathering of his brethren that assembled in the park that bears his name at High Twelve on Thanksgiving Day, 1920, he would surely have been proud of them; for thousands of Masons and their families filled the park; so many in fact that they flowed out onto Second Boulevard and Bagg Street.

Although little has been written about that groundbreaking ceremony; a panoramic photograph taken on the occasion sums up the story with but a single word—pride.

Masonic Pride was certainly the order of the day. Templars, in full regalia lined one side of the assembled masses; Master Masons another. A Band in full attire was present to provide musical accompaniment for the auspicious occasion as many in the crowd waved placards and hoisted Old Glory proudly towards the sky in honor of this great Masonic architectural undertaking.

Nearly two years later, on September 18, 1922, thousands once again gathered to witness the laying of the cornerstone at the corner of Second and Temple. As with the House of the Temple in Washington DC (see issue 1) and the George Washington Masonic National Memorial (see issue 2) George Washington's famous trowel was brought from the Virginia lodge that bears his name. There, in the Northeast angle, Washington's trowel spread the first cement that would be used to erect this Temple of 20th century Masonic Pride and optimism.

That Temple was opened four years later on Thanksgiving Day, 1926; its rooms dedicated and

consecrated for Masonic use in full ceremony by the Grand Lodge of Michigan.

Not Just Another Masonic Temple

This Masonic Temple was not just another Freemasons' Hall. Indeed, never before or since has so large and complex a Temple been constructed, including the one made famous by King Solomon.

It is hard for anyone who has not passed through the doors of the Detroit Masonic Temple to fully comprehend just how unique and special this building was to those viewing it for the first time in 1926 or to the millions who have entered its doors since.

The 1926 booklet published by the Temple Association gives us an indication of just how massive the building as a whole was by stating that

there are 1,037 rooms in the Temple, the roof of copper concrete and asphalt is 80,000 square feet in area-or nearly two acres; the excavation for the foundations required the removal of 1,620,000 cubic feet of earth: 3,850,000 bricks were used for partitions and walls; the exterior contains 100,000 cubic feet of stone from the quarries of Indiana, and the structural steel used in the erection of the building weighs 16,000,000 pounds.

But the Masonic Temple Association of Detroit was not the only group boasting of the size and scope of the new building at the time of its construction. An advert for Richardson Roofing, who provided the Temple's roof, found in the January 12, 1924 edition of the Literary Digest reads in part:

This beautiful structure can accommodate more than 15,000 people without the least confusion. Its electrical plant is large enough to supply power and light for a small city. (3)

Similarly, manufacturers of everything from trucks to urinals were only too proud to take out full-page ads in a variety of publications boasting that their product line was the brand chosen to be used for or by the Detroit Temple. Apparently 1920s Masonic Pride was contagious, at least where the new Temple was concerned.

Not only was the building to be used for Masonic and public purposes, it would be a place for Masons to relax and enjoy some recreation. The building included a 3-chair barber shop, a shoeshine parlor, 15 bowling alleys, billiards room, a world-class gymnasium, bakery, cigar shop, a roof-top garden and a swimming pool. Unfortunately the swimming pool was never completed and despite rumors that it was an architectural flaw that prevented its completion, the Temple Association denies that there is any truth to the rumor. The simple fact of the matter is that the Depression hit and there were not the funds available to complete the plans for the pool.

What did get completed was a 12 million cubic foot Gothic structure consisting of 28 units, which were broken into three sections: the Ritualistic Tower, the Auditorium and the Shrine Tower.

The first of these, the Ritualistic Tower, soars 210 feet above Temple Avenue and is comprised of fourteen stories, including a designed but never completed Master Masons' auditorium, which would have seated eight hundred Masons. Below the empty auditorium there are seven lodge rooms, each with its own unique decorative style; Byzantine, Corinthian, Egyptian and Italian Renaissance, being but a few examples of the variety of architecture found in them. An additional two lodge rooms were planned for but, like the auditorium, never completed. In addition the Ritual Tower included a Chapter

room, Commandery Asylum and a meeting room for the Scottish Rite.

According to the booklet on the Temple, at the time of its opening, the Ritualistic Tower provided "a home for twenty-six Blue Lodges, the Consistory, two Commanderies, five Chapters and the Council."

The auditorium section, which was the handle in George Mason's original gavel design, consists of far more than the famous 4,404 seat auditorium, which has seen everything from rock acts like Jimmy Hendrix and the White Stripes to the theatrical plays of Andrew Lloyd Webber grace its massive 5,500 square foot stage over the years.

Directly above the auditorium is a 17,500 square foot drill hall designed for the uniformed bodies of Freemasonry, which, at the time of its construction, consisted of the Commanderies, Consistory and the Shrine Patrol. The entire floor is a floating floor; one of only three in the United States in existence at the time. The floor's hardwood was laid on felt in order to provide cushion, thus preventing foot and leg fatigue for Masonic marchers. For the last decade, New York's famed Rockettes have rehearsed their annual Christmas Spectacular in the Detroit Temple's Drill Hall. In addition, the rival Fox Theatre often uses the floating floor for their rehearsals, allowing the Fox to showcase one show in their theatre while rehearsing the next across town in the Drill Hall.

Below the auditorium there are two ballrooms; the Crystal and the Fountain. The smaller of the two, the Crystal Ballroom, was designed in an Italian style and derives its name from two large crystal chandeliers found in the room. At the time of its creation, this room was considered large enough to accommodate 900 for dinner or 1,500 for dancing. Modern fire code regulations have reduced the maximum capacity by almost half. While by today's standards, this seems like quite a large ballroom, no matter how many are currently allowed to occupy it, it is the larger of the two that gives an indication of just how much socializing went on in the Detroit Temple during the mid-1920s.

Two large staircases; one on either side of the room lead to the large, circular banquet and dance hall called the Fountain Ballroom, which was advertised at its opening to be big enough to seat 1,800 for dinner and 3,000 for dancing. Again these numbers have been reduced by almost half.

The room takes its name from the large mosaic fountain, which was once a central feature of the room. Until recently, the namesake fountain had not been seen by Masons of the present era. It was discovered by accident in the course of some repair work to the dance floor.

According to Russell Spice, the wooden floor of the Fountain Ballroom always felt a little different and had a bit of give to it. Eventually, this floor began to have some serious problems and the cost of replacing the floor was estimated at a half a million dollars. This amount was too much for the troubled Temple and the maintenance man was instructed to tear the floor up in one corner to see what was underneath.

Much to everyone's surprise and delight, they discovered that beneath the decaying wood floor, was a Terrazzo floor in pristine shape. Spice checked the records of the Associations minutes from the time when the Temple opened onward. He discovered that after the first year of operation the Mason's wives had complained that dancing on the terrazzo floor caused their legs and back to hurt So much so that the Association covered it in wood. Taking a lead from the Commandery Drill Hall, the new floor consisted of 2 x 4s, lined in felt, overtop of which the hardwood floor was laid.

All that they had to do was to tear up the hardwood, pick up the felt-lined 2 x 4s and give the

underlying terrazzo floor a quick sweep and mop—problem solved.

The End Of One Problem And The Start Of Another

If all of the Detroit Masonic Temple's problems were as easy to fix as tearing up an old wooden dance floor, the plight of the building would not be so grave.

Recent departures by the Shrine, in August of 2003, and the Scottish Rite, in January of 2006, have deprived the Detroit Temple of much needed financial resources.

The 10-story Shrine Tower had been the home of the Moslem Shriners for 77 years, but it seems they did not understand that the $22,000 they paid each month was not rent, but more like a condo fee for the upkeep of the property. With their departure, the Temple Association lost over a quarter of a million dollars per year in revenue.

According to Spice, the consensus of opinion is that "they felt they were paying too much for a building they didn't own."

"You have to understand how this building is put together," Spice said. "It's an association just like a homeowner's association in a condominium complex."

That association was formed by the Masonic fraternity, with each group having a number of seats and votes on the Temple Board.

"The Scottish Rite had nine seats, the Shrine had six and all the York Rite and Blue Lodge bodies had one seat [each]. So we had 40 some seats. The title of the building and the title of the land is in the name of the association; so the Shrine would say 'we don't own the building, the association owns it,' which is a true statement; except they owned part of the association. When they moved out, we had 35 seats on the board—they had six of the 35, so they had 6/35 or one 1/7of the ownership of the association, which owned the building. Granted, they couldn't go out and sell a seventh of the building and take the money."

Whether the Moslem Shriners are in better shape since their move from Detroit or not largely depends on who you talk to. According to Spice, when you compare how much the Shrine was paying to the amount of space they had, it worked out to about $4.00 per square foot. Considering that the going rate in Detroit currently ranges between $8 and $14 per square foot, Spice feels his Detroit Temple was a bargain.

According to other sources, the present building used by the Moslem Shriners is said to have cost $4 million and was purchased with cash. If this is in fact the case, it does not take an accountant to figure out that $4 million, properly invested would have generated enough interest to more than pay the $250,000 a year they were paying to the Temple Association for a 10-story facility.

Just prior to Thanksgiving, 2005, almost 85 years to the day of its groundbreaking ceremony, the Temple Association was forced to lay off half of its employees. At that time they had 40 full time and 200 part time employees.

As if the Shrine's departure was not taxing on the remaining members, the January 1st departure of the Scottish Rite from the building further injured the struggling Temple's chances of survival. At the time

of their departure, the Scottish Rite was paying $390,000 per year for their share of space in the 550,000 square foot Temple.

Unlike the Moslem Shriners, it seems the Scottish Rite has not immediately moved into a new building. According to sources inside the organization, they are planning to move into the struggling Dearborn Masonic Temple, which rumor has it, is being given to the Scottish Rite, who will spend a couple of years renovating the building.
The Scottish Rite are presently renting space in an old school building until their new facilities can be completed.

With the AASR's departure, the Temple, which optimistically started its life as a home for the York Rite, Scottish Rite and the Shrine, is now living its last days as a purely York Rite building.

According to Spice, there are now only 15 groups, consisting of 10 lodges, 2 Chapters, 1 Council, 1 Commandery and the York Rite Sovereign College, still meeting in the Temple.

"The Shrine and the Scottish Rite moving out took so many members and such a large portion of our budget that the Association cannot adjust quickly enough and we could be forced to close our doors," Spice said of the harsh realities now facing the Temple.

This is not the first time that the Temple has been in financial trouble. When the stock market crashed in 1929, the building fell upon hard times and had to take out a mortgage to survive. Unfortunately the times proved to be too harsh and the Temple defaulted on the mortgage declaring bankruptcy around 1932. But they were able to operate under Chapter 11 restructuring and weathered the storm of the Great Depression.

The Masonic boom of Post World War II Masonry allowed the Temple to rebound, but never to the status and prestige of those men who raised the money to build it in the first place.

In reflecting on the ups and downs of the Detroit Temple over the years, Spice recounts a story from 1990, when he was president of the temple Association. At that time, he was frequently invited to attend various functions held by the bodies then meeting in the Temple.

At a Past Master's Night, an old Past Master stood up and told the crowd that, in his year, they did Master Mason Degrees every Friday night and on some Saturdays three different degree teams were working simultaneously to get all the candidates through.
The same master told that while he was Master, the manager of the Detroit Tigers and four of his ball players joined. The crowd was so large that they used the main theatre for the Master Mason degree, which was filled to standing room only status—5,000 Masons.

Spice confirms the reality of the story and just how busy the building was in the 50s by recounting how the minutes of one lodge tell how there was a Master Masons' dinner every fourth Friday. Would-be diners were encouraged to reserve a spot early as seating was limited to 2,000 Masons.

Despite the fact that countless thousands of men became Masons in the late 40s and early 50s, little was done to complete the Temple or provide funds for its future upkeep.

"Nobody valued Masonry high enough. They were still paying the old dues; the old structure—they weren't getting enough money from these guys," Spice said.

It is a refrain that is common today and a real part of the problem experienced by too many lodges. In 1892 Masons were donating an average of $80 per member in 19th century dollars, to build a new Temple and over a century later, modern Mason won't spend $80 per year in dues to support the same.

On the subject of post-world War II Masons, Spice is as candid as he is in his views on the fate of his beloved Detroit Temple:

"I would say that the guys that came after world war two weren't the visionaries that you had earlier. I think they were, as your other authors will tell you (your bowling alone, people like that). Those people will tell you that they were joiners that wanted to hang out with other men. But I don't really see them as visionaries and they really didn't build anything; you know we didn't go get the golf course back [The Masonic Country Club was lost for taxes during the Great Depression. Ed.], we didn't finish the building. We just maintained it."

Indeed, the generation of Masons who flooded the craft after World War II, was far less committed to completing the dream that the Masons of a previous generation had started. They were content to utilize the splendor of the Detroit Masonic Temple, but unwilling to utilize their financial resources to complete the Master Masons' auditorium, swimming pool or to do anything more than simply maintain the building. Today's Mason seems even less committed—perhaps they have simply accepted defeat.

From Grandeur to Ghetto

Today the Detroit Masonic Temple is the last stronghold of a bygone era that has seen the Cass Corridor, now called Midtown; go from the grandeur of early 20th century optimism to the ghetto it has become today.

The Hotel Fort Wayne, which once occupied the corner adjacent to the Detroit Temple now stands empty and boarded up; on one corner of the hotel are carved the words, "Wayne Lodge No 104 Knights Of Pythias"—the last memory of the fact that this section of Detroit was once planned to be home to a large number of Fraternal Orders, all built up around the Detroit Masonic Temple.

Across from the Temple stands the once proud Williamson Apartments, which was renamed the Temple Towers, soon after it was announced that the Masonic Temple would soon begin construction. The interior of this 64-unit apartment building built in 1917 has been all but destroyed by the squatters and junkies who have made it their home off and on over the years.

Despite successfully suing the city in 1998 to block a proposal to turn the Temple Towers into a shelter for Homeless AIDS victims, the association has been very supportive of the plight of the homeless over the years. Each year the Temple Association donates their kitchen and dining rooms to the Salvation Army who feed up to 3,000 of the area's homeless each Christmas and Thanksgiving.

From the outside, the Masonic Temple still displays its pride although its surroundings have been weathered by the elements and soiled by urban decay. One has to navigate past empty fast food containers and other debris of unknown origins to approach the Temple. The staircase leading to the underground driveway where Ballroom patrons once escaped the elements is now home to a shopping cart filled with a homeless person's worldly possessions.

The intricate carvings crafted by Corrado Parducci and his team of stonemasons now carry eight

decades of wear and tear. This is not the fault of the Temple Association. As an historical monument, the Association is not permitted to sandblast any part of the exterior. As such, the sculpture of operative masons and knights all seem to be weeping; the result of years of water and grime running down their stone faces.

Inside the building, the Association has done its best to maintain the interior with what limited resources they have at their disposal. According to Spice, “the number one comment we get is how well it is maintained. People are surprised about that.”

Indeed, for all its hard times, the Detroit Masonic Temple’s interior has been well looked after. While walking through its various rooms one is reminded of the once well-to-do gentlemen, who has fallen upon hard times, but still meticulously grooms himself each day. Though some of his clothes are a little threadbare, he still carries himself with dignity.

Perhaps the most impressive and pristine aspect of the building is the Knights Templar or Commandery quarters found on the third floor of the Ritual Tower area.

On first entering the Templar Parlor, one is immediately impressed with the elegant Tudor style, chosen by the designers for the room. With its staircase leading to an upstairs alcove, large conference tables and comfortable seating arrangements throughout, one gets the feeling that this room was once a great place of refuge for the Templars of the roaring 20s to enjoy a few minutes of fellowship ahead of getting on with the work of the evening.

Here amid the high oak paneled walls and elegant furniture, one finds two Knights in full armor guarding the doorway to the much larger Templar Asylum—the room used by the Commandery to hold their meetings and to initiate new members.

The Asylum is breathtaking in its design and was styled after a room in the Tower of London. Here, it is said, the Crusading knights would receive their orders before heading off to war. Whether the story is a matter of historical fact or merely another case of Masons taking poetic license with history, one can clearly feel a medieval flair to the Templar asylum with its authentic Gothic design of high Ogive arches, flagstone flooring and stained glass windows.

Like most rooms in the Ritualistic Tower, the Templar’s Parlor and Asylum feels unexplainably haunting; almost as if the rooms are now occupied by the ghosts of what once was and the feeling that those ghosts have resigned themselves to the fact that what once was is unlikely to ever be again.

Few Options Remain

There are few options left for the Detroit Masonic Temple. Indeed by the time this article is published, the Temple, like so many Masonic buildings in Michigan and elsewhere may be nothing but a boarded up memory.

Mortgage

During the rough times of the Great Depression, the Temple association took out a mortgage to save the building. As Russell Spice said on the idea of mortgaging the 80-year-old building, ““when you go get a mortgage you have to have a business plan to tell them how you are going to pay it back. Just because you own a property that is worth so much; if you can’t turn any of it into cash, you can’t repay the

mortgage." The harsh reality is that, given the fact that so few Masons are left to support the Temple, no bank will seriously consider lending money to save it.

Selling The Building

Surely a building with over 1,000 rooms including a world class theatre in an area that could be at the forefront of a major urban revitalization project must have a potential to be sold; for even the most undesirable property has some market value. However, one must remember that the Detroit Temple was opened eighty years ago and, even though well cared for, little has been done to install more modern building features that are mandatory under present day building codes. This is certainly not a problem for this or any older building so long as the building remains in the current owner's hands. Most areas, and Detroit is no exception, have a grandfather clause. A building only needs to be fully brought up to code when it changes hands. As such any potential buyer would need to bring the building up to code prior to making so much as a nickel from the investment. This could add countless millions of dollars to the costs for any potential buyer and immediately crushes the prospects of the building being sold.

Partnerships May Hold The Key

When the first Masonic Temple was built, it was created through a partnership of the various Masonic bodies, then operating in Detroit. The same level of fraternal cooperation was used to create the present Temple Avenue building. Now that the Shrine and Scottish Rite have abandoned that long-standing partnership in favor of greener pastures, perhaps it is time for the remaining members of the Detroit Masonic Temple Association to consider bringing in outside partners through a Joint Operating Agreement. As such, much needed funds could be injected into the building to not only save it, but to also expand it, and perhaps even act as a catalyst for a major rejuvenation of the Midtown area. Since ownership of the building does not change hands in a Joint operating Agreement, the grandfather clause would apply, allowing the Temple Association time to slowly bring the building up to code as it begins to enjoy new revenues created by such a partnership. This of course is pure speculation on the part of the author, although rumors of just such a plan have been circulating in Detroit for some time.

Would You Give If It Were In your Power?

When the Shrine and Scottish Rite vacated the Detroit Temple, in 2003 and 2006 respectively they took with them $654,000 per year in much needed revenues. Granted, the highly popular and successful Masonic Theatre, now operated by the Nederlander family, provides the Temple with the bulk of its annual revenue. Although various rentals in the building provide additional income; still it is not enough to save the building from being boarded up.

The Detroit Temple was built with Masonic pride from the contributions of the Masons who were proud to erect the building, but a lack of that same Masonic pride will ultimately leave the largest Temple in the world as empty as the buildings that now surround it.

Many Grand jurisdictions regularly collect money from their members in support of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. But is a building erected in honor of American Masonry's most famous son more worthy of the craft's attention and charity than the largest building ever erected for Masonic usage?—apparently so. It is a sad fact that the Grand Lodge of Michigan collects $1.00 per Michigan Mason, approximately $70,000 per year, in support of the GWMNM, but does not collect a single penny to support the Detroit Temple.

There are presently 1.5 million dues paying Freemasons in the United States of America. If each one of those Masons gave but fifty cents per year, the Temple would replace the funds previously provided by the Shrine and Scottish Rite and have some hope for a continued existence.

Robbie And Me

In October of 2005 I stood beside Robbie Burns' monument, which stands vigil in the park named for the first Grand Master of Michigan. Burns and I stood there silently looking northward towards the pile of rubbish that now surrounds the famed Temple of Detroit. We could not help but wonder if, like the fate of Hiram, the traitorous craftsmen would ultimately cast this body in the refuse as well.

Written on the back of Burns' monument one finds words from his poem Tam o' Shanter: "Nae man can tether time nor tide."

As the prophetic words of the bard sank in and I contemplated the probable fate of this once proud and great Masonic Temple, I realized that it wasn't the statue of the bard that was weeping.

Footnotes

1 http://detroitmta.lodges.gl-mi.org/oldtemple.html
Accessed: January 29, 2006
2 Detroit Temple Book
3 Richardson Roofing Ad. Literary Digest, January 12, 1924, pg 45.